

## **The Middleman by PureShores**

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**Summary:**

All of Hawkins knows that something's up with Mike Wheeler. He is suffering, and El is suffering too. Only Jim Hopper is able to see both sides.

## The Middleman

### Author's Note:

I wanted to do a story about the time between seasons 1 and 2 when Mike and El were apart. I have read so many fantastic stories set in this time period and I thought it was high time I threw my hat in the ring. It occurred to me that only one person in Hawkins would have any comprehension of what both of them were going through; our resident police chief, Jim Hopper. I hope you enjoy.

This story is set mid-January, 1984, when by my calculations (and I could be wrong) El has been staying with Hopper for about a month.

It was 7:00 on a cold, miserable Thursday night in Hawkins, Indiana. Chief Jim Hopper would have liked to be on his couch, with a drink in his hand, but instead he was standing in line at the local grocery store. Behind him, a mother with a screaming toddler. In front of him, some old bat with a million coupons in her gnarled old claw, earbashing the employee working the checkout, as though they were the only two people in the store.

Well, she might be trying to avoid her inevitable appointment with the Cryptkeeper. But he had a kid at home waiting for him. A kid who he'd promised to be home for by 7:30, (seven-three-zero.) And also, a kid who could throw him across the room with a flick of her wrist if he pissed her off. Which he often did. But, as he'd discovered, she gave as good as she got. For a kid who'd spent the majority of her life in a state of forced obedience, and could barely even put a sentence together when he'd found her, she sure had a smart mouth on her. And what she couldn't convey in words, she said in glares, or sighs, or screams of frustration that made the walls shake, and sent his worldly possessions flying.

The old bat launched into what was sure to be a *fascinating* anecdote of last week's knitting circle, and his eyes met the employee's over her wiry, grey head. The kid looked about eighteen, had circles under

his eyes, and gave off the impression that he would rather step out into oncoming traffic than listen to one more word. He could relate to that.

It took another ten minutes for the woman to finally finish handing over her coupons, insist that the bags repacked according to type of food, and hobble away from the counter, seemingly oblivious to the murderous glares being sent her way by the employee, Hopper, and every other person in the line.

“Hello, Chief,” said the kid, listlessly, scanning the items through. “How are you today?”

“Fucking spectacular, kid,” he grunted sarcastically, glancing at his watch (seven-one-five) “I got fifteen minutes to get across town before she murders me.” The boy smirked, and Hopper knew he assumed he was referring to whatever unlucky woman he was sleeping with this week. He’d never thought his horndog reputation would actually turn out to be useful, but it had its benefits. It provided the perfect cover for any slip-ups he might make, and nobody ever suspected the ‘she’ he mentioned might be his telekinetic adopted kid. After all, why would they?

“Godspeed, Chief,” he said, as he handed Hopper the receipt. “Hope she’s in a forgiving mood.”

He was almost to the safety of his truck when a voice hailed him from across the parking lot. He closed his eyes in irritation, hoping whoever it was would just disappear and let him get away, but no such luck.

Ted Wheeler came ambling towards him, holding a carton of milk, with that same deadpan expression he always had. Hopper didn’t recall ever seeing him smile or laugh or even look annoyed (though he didn’t see him that often). He was the textbook example of the corporate stooge. Respectable job, nuclear family, nice car; he ticked all the boxes on the ‘successful’ checklist, but didn’t seem to be brought any real happiness by any of it.

“Ted,” Hopper tipped his hat to him, hoping against hope this was simply a social greeting. It took twenty minutes to drive to the cabin

from here; he was already late, and any more delay would just make him later. “Don’t often see you about at night.”

Ted shrugged. “Karen’s baking a cake or something. Forgot to buy milk.”

“Well give her my best,” said Hopper, conjuring up something that resembled a smile, and opening the car door. “Good night, Ted.”

“Actually I wanted to ask you something,” said Ted, confirming Hopper’s suspicion, and he bit back a sigh.

“I don’t know if you know my son, Michael...”

Hopper couldn’t help but let out a bark of laughter that he hastily covered with a passable imitation of a smoker’s cough.

*Did he know Michael Wheeler?*

Even if he hadn’t met the kid before (which of course he had, Hawkins was a small town) and even if they hadn’t crossed paths again in the hunt for Will, he would still know Mike Wheeler. And why? Because El rarely talked about anything else.

It had started a few days after he’d brought her to the cabin. She’d done practically nothing but sleep and eat at first, and he let her, because God only knew what she’d been dealing with out there in the woods for so long. She kept her distance from him too, like a wounded animal. She wanted to trust him but wasn’t sure if she should.

She didn’t talk much in those first few days, but after what felt like a hundred one-sided conversations, she at least began to respond when he asked her things.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

“What do you want to eat?”

“Eggos.”

And so on and so forth, until that night over TV dinners, El had initiated conversation for the very first time.

“I want to see Mike.”

They'd already set down the ‘Don’t Be Stupid’ rules. He'd reiterated to her the importance of keeping their heads down and watching their backs. He'd explained it all. She'd nodded her head; she'd seemed to understand. They were on the same page.

But it seemed if she had her way, that prudence and rationality and caution were all to be thrown out the window in favour of Mike Wheeler.

He explained to her, again, the importance of the rules. Told her that her only chance right now was to lie as low as possible because they'd probably be looking for her. But it was only when he mentioned that showing herself would be putting Wheeler in danger that she finally, reluctantly, backed down.

At least till the next day, when she asked again. And then the day after that, and the day after that, and the day after that, and so it went on, every day.

Sometimes in the morning, sometimes at night. Sometimes begging and pleading, sometimes bargaining, sometimes demanding while in the midst of a telekinetic temper tantrum; it didn't really matter, the takeaway point was always the same, Mike, Mike, Mike, like a broken record. It was driving him crazy.

It then occurred to him that Ted was waiting for an answer, so he half-shrugged. “We’ve met,” he said.

“He’s been acting up for the last few months. Fighting at school, backtalking the teachers, and basically making a damn nuisance of himself. Frankly, his mother and I are tired of it. So Karen thought maybe you could come by for dinner one evening soon, and maybe put the fear of God into the boy. See if that doesn’t straighten him out.”

Hopper hadn’t seen much of the kids since that day in the hospital.

Other than Will of course, when he went with Joyce to see that moron Owens. He wasn't about to let her go there alone, after all. She'd already been through enough. The other three he occasionally passed in the street, riding their bikes or eating ice cream or whatever, and they'd wave at him. Sometimes he waved back, and sometimes he didn't. They'd all seemed reasonably well adjusted from what he'd seen, but frankly, it didn't surprise him that Wheeler was going off the rails. The kid had seen some serious shit; they all had, it was bound to mess with their heads. Not to mention, if he was pining for Eleven even half as much as she was for him, that was probably screwing the poor kid up in a whole different way.

"Has he said why he's doing it?" asked Hopper curiously, and Ted shrugged.

"Can barely get a word out of him. Hell, we barely even see the boy; he's always off with his friends, in his room, or sulking in the basement. It's not normal." Here, Ted's mouth hardened into a firm line. "People are starting to talk."

Hopper knew Ted Wheeler well enough to know that this part was the essential point; that his son had dared to unsettle the perfect portrait of family life that Ted and Karen had spent years constructing. Their kid's pain was making them look bad, their social position in Hawkins was threatened, and they couldn't have that.

Clearly, they were idiots. Hopper knew a deadbeat kid when he saw one, and Mike Wheeler was anything but. He was a good kid, trying to deal with something so fucked up it sometimes gave *Hopper* nightmares. He deserved a little sympathy. And then maybe a swift kick up the ass for being stupid enough to make his parents suspicious. Nobody but those involved knew about the events that had happened, and Hopper planned to keep it that way.

But it wouldn't hurt to check on him, even if just for El's peace of mind, who fretted about him constantly.

"I'm busy this weekend," he said, which was true, he and El had planned to watch movies and do some more work on the cabin. He didn't get to spend much time with her during the week so his rare

weekend off was a golden opportunity. “But I can probably swing by next week some time.”

“Excellent, give us a call. Karen’ll fix something nice.”

It appeared the conversation was now over, as Ted inclined his head to him, and then immediately turned to his car. Now he’d gotten what he wanted it seemed, the usual social pleasantries were of no interest. It didn’t really bother Hopper, who wasn’t that big on pleasantries himself, but still he found himself revisiting his long-held opinion that Ted Wheeler was in fact, a dick.

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He arrived at the cabin fifteen minutes behind schedule, and wasn’t at all surprised when he had to employ the secret knock three times before she let him in. He was also unsurprised to find that she’d done so telekinetically, the importance of getting him in out of the cold apparently paled in comparison to whatever rubbish sitcom she was watching.

He made a mental note to get her some books. Even her superpowered brain would end up rotting if she did nothing but watch this trash day in and day out.

“Late,” she informed him snootily, not taking her eyes from the screen. “Seven-four-five.”

“I know, kid. I’m sorry. I got held up at the store by Ted Wheeler and....”

He realised his mistake immediately as she registered the word ‘Wheeler’ and gasped. She swung her head round to face him faster than the speed of light.

“Mike?”

Goddammit the hope in her eyes made him want to throw something. He cursed himself for the slip of the tongue, and braced himself, yet

again, for the argument.

“He wasn’t there,” he said, and watched her wilt in disappointment.  
“Just his dad.”

He waited for the inevitable declaration, wondering which El he’d be getting tonight. Begging El tended to pull at heartstrings he didn’t know he had, the rarely seen rational El was usually pretty easy to reason with, and the less said about psychokinetic temper tantrum El, the better.

But it never came. Instead she flopped back down on the couch cushions with a deep sigh. Hopper, who couldn’t believe his luck, inched around the side of the couch to see her eyes fixed on the TV, but glassy, as though she weren’t seeing it at all.

“Miss Mike,” said El, quietly.

“I know you do, and I bet he misses you too. But you know you can’t see him yet because—”

“-we’re not stupid,” she supplied dully, not once moving her eyes from the screen.

She stayed in the same melancholy mood all night, even when he produced the Eggos that had been the reason for the trip to the grocery store. She didn’t want to talk, to eat, to listen to music or do much of anything really until 9:00 rolled around and she abruptly put herself to bed, without a word to him. He hadn’t really been enforcing a bedtime as such, after all it wasn’t like she had to get up for school or anything the next day, but he normally had to switch the TV off himself when he felt it was getting too late and shoo her into her bedroom.

The thud of her bedroom door closing echoed around the small cabin.

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The Wheeler kid’s intervention, so to speak, was scheduled for

Wednesday night at 7:00. The weekend and the beginning of the week had passed without great incident, save for another trip to the lab with Will and Joyce, and a hysterical report from a local about a black bear, which had turned out to be someone's escaped dog. He was more concerned about El, who had since taken to moving the TV into her bedroom every day and closing the door, essentially locking him out. She ate meals with him, and answered any direct questions he asked but otherwise kept to herself, and sulked. He was starting to get concerned, but was at his wit's end as to what to do about it. Sarah had never reached her teenage years after all, and it wasn't like he could just call Joyce up and ask for parenting tips. He could only hope that eventually, she would pull herself out of her slump.

Over breakfast on Wednesday morning, he broke the news to her that he would be late home again that night. He'd decided not to mention that his 'dinner plans' were with her beloved Mike's family, for obvious reasons. She stood at the door and waved him off unenthusiastically, before shutting it behind him. As always, he lingered long enough to hear the locks engage, and the TV immediately turn on, blaring some moronic infomercial. He sighed.

Mike, to put it plainly, was not pleased to see him. Clearly his parents had not informed him that they were to be expecting company, and he could feel the kid eyeing him suspiciously as they sat around the table eating Karen's excellent roast beef and vegetables. It was a damn good meal, the best he'd had in months, and he wondered if it would be out of line for him to ask to take home some leftovers. El needed a good meal, real food. Maybe it would lift her spirits.

Once all the plates had been cleared, Mike immediately rose from his chair presumably to disappear back to his room, but his father spoke up.

"Not so fast, boy. Sit down."

Hopper saw Mike exchange a confused glance with Nancy, before sulkily obeying the command.

"Nancy, take Holly upstairs please," said Karen, softly, clearly avoiding her son's eye. "The rest of us need to have a little chat."

Mike's eyes narrowed as he understood what was happening, and he glowered at them all as Nancy scooped up her younger sister and carried her away, casting a sympathetic glance at her brother as she did. Of course, Nancy would have understood what Mike was dealing with better than the rest of the family. After all, she'd lived it too.

"What the hell is this?" Mike spat, the moment his sisters left the room, directed at his parents. Hopper was surprised at the acidity in his tone; the last time he'd talked to the kid, he'd been all earnestness and shaggy hair and big eyes. Sitting in front of him now was a moody teenager with an axe to grind.

"Your mother and I are sick of your attitude," said Ted flatly, earning himself an eye-roll from his son, and a murderous glance from his wife.

"What your dad means to say is that we're worried about you, honey," said Karen; in such syrupy tones that Hopper couldn't really blame Mike for rolling his eyes at her too. "You've been so angry lately, and we just thought that—"

"That you'd bring the Chief here to try and scare me straight?" Mike cut in savagely, over the top of his mother. He addressed his father. "This was your idea, wasn't it?"

Ted shrugged, unrepentant. "Someone needs to pull you into line, son. And you're clearly not listening to us."

"Why should I? You two wouldn't care at all if it wasn't making you look bad at the *golf club*," Mike sneered. "Asshole."

"Hey," Hopper spoke up for the first time. He agreed with Mike, Ted was a self-righteous, pompous pain in the ass, but that was no way for a kid to speak to his father. At least not until he was an adult, and no longer living under his roof. "Watch your mouth, kid."

Mike turned his ire on him instead. "What the hell are you even doing here, anyway? Can't be bothered to cook a meal yourself? Swinging bachelor life not working out for you anymore?"

"Mike!" his mother admonished him, in horror. "Apologise! Right

now.”

“It’s okay, Karen,” said Hopper, soothingly. He’d endured far worse from the assholes in the drunk tank after all. “Why don’t you and Ted give us a minute to talk?” he suggested. The root cause of the problem after all, was not something they could discuss in front of his parents.

Ted couldn’t get out of his seat fast enough, seemingly relieved to be able to turn his son’s disciplinary problems over to someone else, but Karen lingered a little, until her husband came and dragged her out of the kitchen. Hopper felt his lip curl as he watched it, no man should put his hands on a woman for any reason other than the good ones, but she didn’t seem distressed, so he let it go.

Mike he noticed, was watching them too, the same disdain on his face, and he felt a strange affinity with the kid. Seemed like they had a few things in common.

“Okay kid,” he said, and the boy turned to him, arms crossed. “You and I both know that you’re no teenage degenerate, which means there’s something else going on here. So talk.”

It took a while. The kid was like a steel trap. But after a lot of coaxing, wheedling, and a few minor threats, he finally started talking. It came out in a flood of anger, frustration, sadness and guilt, everything from the worry about Will’s ongoing problems to the fury about the people from the lab that had unleashed the Demogorgan on the world. And weaved throughout, El, El, El, misery that he hadn’t been able to save her, anger that after she’d done so much she’d ended up dead (or so he thought), pure bitterness that nobody would ever know what she had done for them. The unfairness of it all.

Once he started on the topic of El, it was like he physically couldn’t stop, even though he could tell he very much wanted to. Midway through he’d paused and looked at Hopper horror-struck. “You think I’m pathetic, I know,” he said. “And maybe I am, but what happened to her, it’s *wrong*.”

“It sure is.” Hopper concurred, vehemently, thinking of the girl just a few miles away, hidden away from the world, in just as much pain,

and with no-one to tell about it but him. He could end both of their suffering, right here. Tell the kid the truth, bring him to the cabin. Let them see each other, give the poor kids a moment's peace from the agony in which they'd found themselves.

But he couldn't. That would be stupid. And *they weren't stupid*.

After about twenty minutes, Mike seemed to finally run out of steam. He lapsed into silence, and reached for his glass of milk. Hopper didn't blame him; he'd barely even paused for breath the whole time.

"Look kid, I get it," he said. Boy, did he get it. "The whole thing was a shitshow. And it's damn unfair it turned out the way it did. But she's gone, you know. You gotta accept it."

*"Friends don't lie."* To his annoyance, El's signature line floated across his mind, and he was suddenly very grateful that Mike didn't have superpowers. Of course, El hadn't ever given any indication that she could read minds either, but with powers like hers, it wasn't far out of the realm of possibility.

Mike shook his head, righteous anger Hopper thought he'd expelled through his twenty-minute monologue now back with a vengeance.

"I don't accept it. I'll *never* accept it. She's out there. I feel it. I *know* it."

Hopper couldn't help but admire Mike's loyalty to Eleven, and the strength of his conviction and fleetingly wished once again that he could tell the kid how right he was.

Mike sighed, and cast his eyes to the kitchen clock, before his eyes bugged out with horror.

"*Shit!*" he exclaimed, and hurled himself out of his chair. He was out of the kitchen and up the stairs before Hopper could move a muscle. His running footsteps seemed to alert Karen, who immediately bustled in from the living room. She looked at Hopper, expectantly.

"How did it go?"

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Hopper arrived back at the cabin a little while later, clutching the Tupperware container of leftovers that Karen had pressed on him as he'd left ("We won't eat it, best not to let it go to waste.") Once again, it took a few repetitions of the secret knock to get the door open, but this time it was opened by a tear-streaked Eleven, who threw herself at him in a hug the moment he shut the door behind him.

"Jesus Christ kid, what's wrong?" Worst-case scenarios rushed through his mind; she'd hurt herself, she'd had a nightmare, she was sick. Worst of all (he shuddered with horror at the thought) someone had found the cabin; threatened her, tried to take her. But then his common sense kicked in. There was no sign of a struggle; the cabin was in the same condition it was in when he'd left this morning, excepting the crying teenager of course.

She clung to him for a few moments more, and he found himself reaching down to stroke her hair, which was already growing longer and starting to curl. He wondered if she'd ever gotten to grow her hair out before. Probably not.

She finally peeled herself away from him and looked up at his face, tears clinging to her eyelashes.

"Mike. In danger."

This statement confused Hopper for many reasons, chiefly the fact that he had just come from Mike's house and knew that the only danger he was in was from drowning in his own teenage dramatics, and also the question that even if he were in danger, how the hell could El have possibly known? She hadn't seen him in months.

"What?"

"In danger," she repeated, urgently. "Have to help him. Hasn't called. Something's wrong."

Mystified as he still was, the word 'called' lodged into Hopper's brain and set off loud alarm bells.

‘He’s been *calling* you?’

She nodded. “Every night. But not tonight.”

Hopper closed his eyes, trying to make sense of what he was being told. Mike apparently, was talking to El every night. Yet the kid he’d just seen at the Wheeler’s was angry and clearly grieving. And yes, he could just be putting on an act to cover his tracks, but the kid had been crying real tears. Surely he wasn’t *that* good an actor. What the hell was going on?

“You’ve been talking to him every night? At the same time?” She may as well have put an ad in the local paper announcing her location if she were going to make a pattern that obvious for the lab to track. Damn teenagers, why didn’t they ever *think*?

But she was shaking her head, and she wasn’t trying to avoid his eye, so he was pretty sure she wasn’t lying.

“Don’t talk,” she admitted, sadly. “Mike talks. I just listen.”

“What?”

Impatiently, she grabbed him by the hand and dragged him into her bedroom. There, she had the TV set up to a channel that was pure static, and one of his old neckties lay on the floor in a heap. She looked at him earnestly, clearly expecting him to understand, but he was utterly lost. He stared around the room in incomprehension, and beside him, saw her mouth twist into a scowl of irritation.

“Like the bath,” she explained. “I find him. I can hear him, and see him. Listen.”

The bath. That was how she had referred to the makeshift sensory deprivation tank they’d knocked up for her last year when she was trying to find Will. She’d been able to find him in the Upside Down, cross into a whole new dimension, and now, if he was understanding this correctly, she’d found another way to do it. Holy shit. This clearly meant that her powers were getting stronger, and he was simultaneously awestruck, and terrified. If somebody found out she was becoming more powerful, they would never stop hunting her.

She'd never be able to leave the safety of the cabin, ever.

"He calls every night," she repeated now. "But not tonight. In danger."

A glance at his watch gave Hopper the last piece of information he needed. It was 8:15 now, which would have put the apparent designated time as falling while he was with Mike. Mike had missed the nightly call, which explained why he'd taken off so quickly at the end, even though there was no way he could have known that she was actually listening. It was simply a coping mechanism to him, but still one that he couldn't miss.

What a mess.

"He's not in danger," he told El, and she started in surprise. "I saw him on the way home. He's fine." It wasn't a lie, at least, but he had the feeling she wouldn't appreciate being told that he'd actually stopped and had an in-depth conversation with Mike without her. He hadn't actually noticed before now, but she'd been trembling a little with fear that some harm had befallen him, and he thanked his lucky stars that he'd come home when he did. He wouldn't have put it past her to screw the 'don't be stupid' rules and make a beeline for Wheeler's house, and then only God knew what might have happened.

"Sure?" she asked, eyes shining with hope, and he nodded. She looked relieved for a split second before looking sad again. "Then why didn't he call? Forgotten me?" She sounded genuinely terrified.

*Jesus Christ.*

For a brief moment, Hopper wished she could have come with him to the Wheeler's tonight. If she had seen the angry, depressed Mike that he had seen; she would understand how ridiculous that question was. The kid was miserable, acting out just so he'd have some outlet for his grief. Hopper also had the theory that their conversation tonight, though it might have given the boy an opportunity to talk about it, wouldn't change things. He'd be very surprised if Mike decided to clean up his act just based on their conversation; he had a feeling only Eleven's presence would be able to do that.

“Take it from me, kid,” he said, softly. “He ain’t forgotten you. He probably just got busy.”

“You promise?”

“Promise.”

Finally, she seemed to calm down, and he marvelled at the fact that she trusted him enough to believe him. A few nights ago, she was barely speaking to him, and now here she was accepting his authority in regards to the one person she probably missed most of all. But Jim Hopper was nothing if not pragmatic, and they had something else to sort out before they were done here.

What she was doing was dangerous, and he had a good mind to put an end to it, but the only way to do that was to get rid of the TV, and he couldn’t quite bring himself to do that. It was after all, the only thing resembling company that she had on those long days alone. So he went for the next best option.

“Okay, now it’s your turn to promise something,” he said, and she looked up at him in surprise. “I know I can’t stop you from using your powers to go visit him. But under no circumstances are you to speak to him. *Not one word.* Understood?”

He just imagined what the kid would do if he found out she was alive. He would probably turn Hawkins upside down looking for her, and Christ knew how much trouble that could bring down on all of their heads.

“I don’t care what he says. I don’t care how much he begs. You. Do. Not. Speak.” He punctuated each word by jabbing the air with his finger, sternly, and she glared at him.

“But-“

“No buts. As long as nobody knows you’re here, you’re safe. And we’re going to keep it that way. Okay?”

She’d only been with him for just over a month, and already he couldn’t imagine his life without her. The idea of something happening to her made his blood run cold at the very thought. He

wanted her to have friends, and school, and a normal life, of course he did, but it just wasn't an option right now. Her safety was the number one concern.

There was a long pause, and he could practically see her racking her brain to try and find some way of getting out of making that promise, but finally, she dropped her eyes to the floor and whispered 'okay.' A tear started to roll down her cheek. Hopper sighed, and knelt till he was at her level.

"This is a bullshit situation," he said. "But I swear to you, this isn't going to be your life. You're gonna get to have normal things, be happy. And you'll get to see Mike."

She nodded sadly.

"When?" she asked.

In all honesty, Hopper didn't know. It could be weeks, months, maybe even years before the heat died down, and any risks they took could be a fatal mistake. But he had to give her something to hold onto, something to strive for.

"Soon."

#### **Author's Note:**

I hope you enjoyed this (hopefully) slightly different take on Mike and El's painful separation. Thanks for reading!